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Agonistic pluralism and accountable selves in global agendas

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Abstract

Global forums represent pluralistic settings that convene powerful social actors from across global politics, business and civil society (e.g. Garsten & Jacobsson, 2007; Garsten & Sörbom, 2014). These settings provide positive accounts of their meetings and discussions to solve socioeconomic disparities; however, it is problematic that power dynamics, selectivity of participation and the privileging of consensus are not addressed. These factors may contribute towards the perpetuation rather than preclusion of the disparities they claim to be addressing (e.g. Brown, Dillard, & Hopper, 2015; Garsten & Sörbom, 2014). We know from Brown et al. (2015, p. 637) that “an agonistic ethos of engagement is crucial to reconcile and maintain a productive tension between inheritance and innovation in the democratic tradition”. Agonism respects an adversarial relationship between participants (Mouffe, 1998), where “each identity...is accepted for its own validity, and that a hierarchy of meaning...is avoided” (Carpentier & Cammaerts, 2006, p. 965). What is less evident in the extant literature is the relationship between actors’ own intent and the pluralistic approach; how all parties can participate in such a way that allows them to be accountable for their own actions and impacts on the world, meagre or otherwise. This form of accountability, “the capacity to give an account, explanation, or reason” (Munro, 1996, p. 3) understands the self as interdependent and relational to others (Roberts, 1996). Building on the conversation begun by Brown et al. (2015), this paper unpacks the accounts of 24 global social actors participating in one of these pluralistic settings, the World Economic Forum (WEF), to understand the tensions that this brings. WEF has been set up to provide a space for selectively different voices, a plurality of voices “committed to improving the state of the world” through “public-private cooperation” (World Economic Forum, 2018). Participants are powerful and engage with it as a “space of possibility” (Brown et al., 2015, p. 640) for transformational change. The aim of the paper is to consider the implications of the practices for participants, their accountabilities and the accountability of the multi-stakeholder setting, given its preference towards consensus. The paper is structured to answer the following questions: 1) in what ways do participants’ accounts describe experiences of agonistic pluralism?; 2) in what ways do these accounts show participants reflexively holding themselves to account for their participation?; and 3) what are the implications of this for developing more effective spaces of possibility? The paper finds that the theory of agonistic pluralism is positive but revealing its practice shows pain, disappointment, struggle, with slow movement and often weak and/or compromised outcomes.

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